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AUTHOR Zeligs, Rose
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ABSTRACT

Children's concepts of death grow with their age and development The three-year-old begins to notice that living things move and make sounds. The five-year-old thinks that life and death are reversable, but the six-year-old knows that death is final and brings sorrow. Children from eight through ten are interested in the causes of death and what happens after death. Adolescents think of death and what happens after death is fearsome yet fascinating, since they are very much aware of the life producing potentialities in their own bodies. Children's reactions to an experience with death are greatly influenced by parental attitudes. Parents can best help children deal with death by not making it a taboo subject; by explaining to the child that death is final, by not sending him away during the mourning periods, by encouraging him to participate in the funeral rites of parents, siblings, and other relatives, and by talking freely about the dead person. Children should absorb from their parents the basic truth that death is part of life and must be accepted as a reality. (Author/EM)

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ROSE ZELIGS, Ed.D.
CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGIST
14256 VENTURA BOULEVARD
SHERMAN OAKS, CALIFORNIA 91403

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Rose Zeligs, Ed.D.

14256 Ventura Blvd.

Sherman Oaks, California 91403

Clinical Psychologist, Private Practice

PS 006443

Dr. Rose Zeligs
14256 Ventura Blvd.
Sherman Oaks, Calif. 91403

ED 076237

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Sherman Oaks, California

ROSE ZELIGS

CHILDREN'S DEVELOPMENTAL CONCEPTS OF DEATH

The the meaning of life and death is the greatest mystery to man. What are children's concepts of death? At first they have no concept of the word "dead." But all children are very much interested in the meaning of life, birth, and death. The three-year-old begins to distinguish between animate and inanimate objects. Jimmy does not want mother to sew on the dolly's head that had been torn off, because it will hurt dolly. But four-year-old Bobby says, "It's not real, Jimmy. It won't hurt dolly."

The three-year-old is beginning to notice that living things move and can make sounds. When a bug does not move, he may inspect it and ask why it is lying still. This is the time to say casually that the bug is dead, and to let him satisfy his curiosity by examining it. To the four-year-old, death has a limited meaning. The five-year-old associates life and death so closely that it is a reversable process to him. Ofcourse, this idea of life after death is found in many religions. The six-year-old child is more aware of the meaning of death and

the sorrow it may bring. He may worry about his mother and fear that she may die. He usually connects death with old age, especially if he has experienced the death of a grandparent. The seven-year-old knows that he will die sometime, and the eight-year-old has learned that people, animals, and plants live and die. Children from eight through ten are interested in the causes of death and in what happens after death.

We see that children's ideas about death grow with their age and development; that three-to-five-year-old children have no concept of the finality of death. To them, everything has a quality of permanence. They talk about death freely as they play with their guns and pretend to shoot each other.

Eustace Chesser (5) says that many children personify death. They think of death as a skeleton or king who goes about secretly and carries people off. Some religions also believe this; that the angel of death enters and takes away the soul from the body.

Sylvia Anthony (2) states that the child's earliest associations with the meaning of death may be very limited; "to one child death may be signified by immobility; to another by sleep; to another by being put into the ground; to another, going up in the sky; to another, going to the hospital, or going on a journey, or disappearance." She says that when we try to explain the meaning of death to children we must know that in ages seven through twelve they do not realize the generality and impersonality of death.

Death is associated with aggressive impulses in the child's

mind, so that when a death does occur he may feel that he has caused it in some way.

As experience with death grows, from the death of flowers, insects, birds, to that of pets and people, the child's concepts widen. He begins to fear his own death and the death of his parents and relatives. When he realizes that death is final and irreversible it may arouse great separation anxiety to him. Marjorie Mitchell (13) says that all children have deep anxieties about death. Her book is concerned with the depth of children's fears about death, the resulting harm to their personalities, and ways to help them find positive answers to their problems.

Meliga (10) reports that when six-year-old Judy's dog, Laddie, died in his sleep, of old age, Judy was very frightened. "Why did Laddie have to die in his sleep?" she asked. Her father answered, "Laddie just happened to die in his sleep, but his death was due to old age. He had a good life with us. We loved him and he loved us. But his body got old and tired and his life was over, so he died. But death is not the same as sleep. When you are asleep, you are alive. You can wake up any time or someone can wake you up. You still keep on breathing and your heart keeps on beating. Your body is resting but you can feel and hear in your sleep."

Adolescents think of death as fearsome yet fascinating. The transition from adolescence to maturity is a time of maximum emotional insecurity. Chesser (5) says they do not want to die without having had the opportunities of life's fulfillments.

So they rebel against war and the insecurity due to the atomic bomb. Some adolescents turn to religion as an insurance against the risk of death. The majority repress and deny their anxiety. The psycho-analytical literature treats the fear of death as an infantile castration anxiety or the dread of losing the love object.

HOW CHILDREN DEAL WITH DEATH

Children's reactions to an experience with death are greatly influenced by the way parents and other authoritative figures act. They absorb the adults' attitudes. Children must be given the true facts. To enshroud the meaning of death in myth and mystery may frighten, confuse, and disturb them. It may have a deep detrimental effect on their future emotional development.

David M. Moriarty (14) writes that the trauma of the death of a parent or sibling is always followed by profound and complex psychological reactions which may permanently distort further maturation of personality. Marjorie Mitchell agrees that children's deep fears and anxieties about death may result in serious harm to their personalities.

In many cases, the death of the father may profoundly affect the entire future of his children. Lack of economic support may burden older siblings who may be required to support the family and lose opportunities for higher education. This may anger an ambitious older brother who has to give up a college education to support a younger sibling. The younger child, who achieves status as a professional person, may look down on his big brother who did not have a chance to go to college. The older man may feel angry and rejected because of lost opportunities due to poverty.

Loss of a father brings about deep insecurity in children because they have no one to turn to for care, protection, and guidance. With added responsibilities they miss the fun, joy, and pleasures of participating with their peers in the social activities that are part of growing up and necessary for self development and self fulfillment. When they are often deprived of the everyday things that their peers have, they feel saddened and left out. If they have to work after school or work their way through college, they miss the extra-curricular activities that are an important part of college life.

Children who lose a father through fatal accidents and especially through assassination, never completely recover from the shock. It changes their entire personality as well as their way of life. If the mother remarries the stepfather may help in some cases or he may create a gap in the relationship between the mother and her children. When he marries the mother, the children have to come along whether they like it or not. It is a packaged deal. The parents are more engrossed in themselves, as newly-wed, than in the children. The youngsters may receive good physical care and material things, but there may be mutual misunderstanding and emotional conflict. Such reactions may be no one's fault, but the natural outcome of the situation. On the other hand, a second marriage, may bring happiness to children as well as to their mother, if the stepfather loves children very much and is able to take them into his heart and show interest and concern for them. The loss of a father through divorce may affect his children in the same way as separation through death.

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When we think how different the life of Caroline Kennedy would have been, had her father lived, we can realize the traumatic effect of his death upon her growing personality. When she was interviewed by Jurate Kazickas, at the age of thirteen, seven years after the death of her father, he says, "Adults who claim to know Caroline describe her as an introverted, restrained and sensitive girl. They feel that the death of her father and uncle, Senator Robert F. Kennedy, left her with a permanent sadness and reserve."

I have had a number of cases dealing with children who had become emotionally disturbed by experiences with death. Their trauma was increased by the unwise handling of authoritative figures who did not understand the children's feelings, who tried to protect them by not telling them the facts and not explaining the real cause of death, not letting them participate in the funeral and mourning ceremonies, and by sending them away during those times. In many cases the adults were so engrossed in their own grief that they were unable to understand and evaluate the children feelings and reactions to the death.

When a young child experiences the death of a member of his family it can be very confusing to him, but we must let him participate in the mourning, in accordance with his age and understanding. Sometimes this is very difficult. When the Kennedy children had to learn about the death of their baby brother, and about their father, their mother did not falter in having them face the facts. We cannot fool children by trying to overprotect them. We only confuse them, for in the end, they must know the truth.

We can only spare our children by helping them meet the facts with faith and courage. Three-year-old John Kennedy, Jr. saluting the bier of his father, will be an image implanted in our hearts forever. But only as he grew older could he begin to understand more fully the meaning of death and mourning.

Dr. Albert Solnit (15) says that siblings must be informed about the death of a still-born child in the family, "otherwise they may believe that mother is hiding something dreadful... and they are markedly concerned about their own future."

EFFECT OF SUDDEN DEATH OF FATHER ON HIS CHILDREN

Mr. and Mrs. K and their two sons, eight-year-old Harry and five-year-old Myron, were driving from New York to California. They stopped at a motel for the night. At ten P.M., when the boys were already asleep, Mr. K suddenly had a heart attack and died. Mrs. K. was overwhelmed at this tragic unexpected blow. Her own father had died the same way when she was only seven years old. She phoned her husband's brother in New York and he arrived the next morning. He arranged for funeral directors to take the body. It had been in the motel all night, while Mrs. K kept a lonely, weeping vigil, over her dead husband.

When the children awoke the next morning and asked for their daddy, the mother had to tell them what happened. "Your daddy passed away last night." The boys were shocked beyond belief. They had gone to sleep leaving their parents in the room, only to awaken to find their father gone. They cried and said they wanted their father; that God should give them back their daddy. They took some matches and started a fire, saying they wanted to

die with daddy. Five-year-old Byron took it very badly. He cried, "My daddy died. I wish I die. I want to be with Daddy." Harry was more quiet but looked like he was in shock. He was probably denying the death of his father in order to protect himself from its reality. He believed that he had caused the death, because he and his brother had been noisy and their father had scolded them the last time they saw him alive. Their mother had often warned them not to upset their father because he might get sick.

Their uncle took the boys and their mother back to their relatives in New York. The father was buried there, but the children were not taken to the funeral. Harry said that he did not want to go. During the mourning period the father's brother and sister stayed with the boys and their mother. Both boys cried that they wanted to have a daddy; that their mother should get them a daddy. She said that she would try to meet someone nice if she could. They remained in New York for two months and then came to California and stayed with Mrs. K's older sister and her husband, until they moved into their own apartment. The children were enrolled in a public school.

The mother continued to cry and mourn for her husband. She had been dependent upon him for everything and felt lost without him. She was unable to control and discipline the boys. The children were then put into a private military school and came home for the week-ends. Both boys were bright and had been good in their schoolwork before the father died.

A year later Mrs. K went to New York for the unveiling and stayed there with relatives for six weeks. During this time the boys spent the week-ends with relatives in California. Fifteen months after the father's death the children were so disturbed that their mother consulted the writer for psychological help. She said, "Harry, now nine years old, is very disturbed. He thinks he caused his father's death. He is a naturally good-natured and easy-going child but now he is full of fears and thinks that everything that happens is always his fault. Byron is now six years old and is in the first grade. He is causing the most trouble. He was his father's favorite. He is more of a rascal than his brother and won't take anything from anyone. He is good in school but not at home. He clings to me, groans in his sleep, and is an allergic child. He is selfish and won't give anything to anyone. He is constantly breaking things for spite. The boys share a room and are constantly fighting. Now Harry is beginning to assert himself more with his brother and tries to get even with him for breaking his toys."

This story reveals the mother's inability to cope with her problems and its harmful effects on her children. She has never accepted her husband's death and blamed it on God for doing this to her. She has not worked out her own grief and by concentrating on her own loss she has been unable to deal with her children adequately and she is unable to help them accept their own loss of their father.

Since the death of their father these boys have, in one way

or another, constantly experienced separation from familiar places, and from close relatives, upon whom they were dependent. They had no feelings of stability since their father died. They believed that he had abandoned them without warning. In their minds he left them suddenly because they were bad and he was punishing them. When their mother sent them to a private boarding school she was also abandoning them. When she went East for six weeks, there was another separation. They had to spend weekends with relatives and again felt insecure, not knowing whether she would ever come back. She was always scolding them and did not really know how to control them or give them any kind of security. They wanted a daddy they could depend upon. Moving from place to place contributed to their insecurity. Boarding school is not a happy place for young children who need to be at home with parents to whom they can relate more closely.

The mother continued to cry all the time and bemoan her fate. The children could not work out their own grief because the mother was so absorbed in her own tragedy that she could not understand or help her children. They felt that they, too, had to continue to be sad and to mourn for their father, without accepting the reality that the separation was final and they must go on living without him. The boys felt guilty and angry, unloved and unwanted, and they lived in fear of future separations and abandonment. They could not depend upon their mother for strength, security, and protection, so their constant anxiety contributed to their restlessness, insecurity, and inability to concentrate on their schoolwork. They displaced their anger onto each other and became

moody, on edge, and unpredictable in their conduct.

The mother had to be helped to separate herself from the dead husband, to accept the reality of his death, stop mourning, and concentrate on the needs and wants of her living children. When she learns to do this, the children will know it, then they too will be able to accept the reality of their father's death and the need to accept the separation as final. They will be helped to learn that the death was not their fault; that their father loved them and did not abandon them; that he didn't want to die and leave them, but he was ill and had no choice, but died because he had a bad heart.

The mother and both boys needed therapy to help them face reality and deal with it. The mother needed to be encouraged to marry again as soon as she found the right man; to give her children a daddy and herself a husband, without feeling guilty about not grieving for her dead husband. She should be told that he would have wanted her to marry so that she and her children would be taken care of and could live a normal and more secure life as a family.

CHILDREN'S FEAR OF THE DEAD

Fear of the dead may cause serious disturbance in children. Sherry, now 25 years old and the mother of three children, is still afraid of dead people. She told me that when she was seven years old she lived near a cemetery. Her fifteen-year-old cousin, Mary, took her there and said, "If you don't do what I tell you I will press a button and the dead person will come out of the grave and get you." When Sherry was fifteen years old her grand-

father died. Until the viewing was over she was too scared to go near the casket. When they lowered him into the grave she was finally relieved, but she was still so afraid that for a long time she slept with all the lights on in her room.

The custom among some religious groups of "viewing the body" can be very frightening to children. At age fifteen Sherry was still afraid to view the dead body of her grandfather. She feared that the dead person would jump out of the coffin and get her.

How can we really know what a child feels and thinks about the death of a relative? The events that stand out are remembered from childhood and continue to affect him, consciously or unconsciously.

Dr. Charles D. Aring, (3) an outstanding neurologist, writes of his own childhood involvement with death. His mother, who was 43 years old when he was born, and an invalid ever since that time, died in their home six years later. He was her only surviving child. He writes, "I have no clear memory of her suffering or death. As far as I know, I was as composed as a youngster might be during the obsequies that took place in the parlor of our home - that is, until some oaf coming up behind me up and held me over the coffin for a good look... if this memory is a screen, it tells something about my unconscious; death had no untoward conscious connotation to a young lad, perhaps because I had no firm ties with a sickly mother. But this is mainly speculation; it is not among my earliest memories."

CHILDREN'S REACTIONS TO THE DEATH OF PUBLIC FIGURES

Children's reactions to the sudden death of public figures

by assassination have been studied. Dr. Lois Murphy reported a wide range of reactions in children ages 12 to 15, to the assassination of President Kennedy. She said that some children were overwhelmed, whereas others did not seem disturbed...in some children death "loosened defenses and evoked residues of emotional expression found in past experiences."

Wolfenstein (16) studying adolescents says, "After the death of a parent the predominant tendency was inhibition of emotional responses, often to a level below the surface of reality, with denial of the loss. In contrast, the President(s death evoked intense emotions and grief."

This suggests to me that children who lose a parent may feel singled out for suffering such a loss, and they cannot share their sorrow with others who are more fortunate. But when there is a universal loss and everyone suffers, they can understand and share their feelings with others.

Aliman, working with Wolfenstein, pointed out that the younger emotionally disturbed children showed increased anxiety and bizarre behavior at the news of the assination of President Kennedy. It invoked the "perception of death in some children as a threat to defenses against their own death wishes against their parents."

Seven months after the death of President Kennedy, I asked an eight-year-old girl what she would wish for if a fairy godmother gave her three wishes. Her third wish was that President Kennedy would not be dead. The tragedy was still in her mind.

Levinson (11) says, "Bereavment presents a seriously traumatic event in a child's life, frequently resulting in insecurity,

anxiety, fear, distrust of the world, and physical discomfort."

Harrison, Davenport, & McDermott (6) report a study of President Kennedy's assassination as it affected children hospitalized at Children's Psychiatric Hospital, University of Michigan Medical Center. They state that there was adult confusion and misperceptions among the staff in their interpretation of how the children reacted to the news of the death of President Kennedy. The staff also disagreed over what the children's appropriate response should be. "There appeared to be numerous distortions in the staff's perceptions of children's reactions, apparently as consequences of the participant's own grief."

I think that this report should alert us to the way adults may react to their own grief during the death of a member of their family, and how their neglect or misunderstanding of the way such a death is affecting their children and that it may result in the emotional disturbance of the youngsters. Anthony (2) says "The adult is often ready to suppose that his own distress at thoughts of death will be shared by the child... this is seldom the case."

The assassination of Robert Kennedy was another unfortunate occasion to study the reaction of children to this tragedy. Helen, a 16-year-old patient of mine, was very disturbed by this event. She said, "I was very upset by Bobby Kennedy's getting shot. Thursday morning, when my mother told me that Bobby Kennedy was dead I just couldn't believe it. I lay in bed for ten minutes without moving, although I had to get up to go to school. When I passed the American flag on the way to school I kept thinking

about Bobby Kennedy. The Battle Hymn of the Republic kept going through my head. We had been singing it in Glee Club.

"When I was in my house I had the feeling that someone was going to shoot me through the window. I ran into my bedroom. I was scared to go any place in my house, but I had to go, of course. I ran into the bathroom. I felt secure only in my bed. This happened all day Thursday. My girlfriend, Jane, had the same fears and feelings. She didn't want to talk about it. I talked about it a lot with my mother. It helps to talk about it.

"We had a test in math and I just couldn't concentrate. I just couldn't get it through my head that he was dead. What Kennedy said kept going over and over in my mind. I just kept saying, "You're not dead! You can't be dead!" My Mom said it was just like a member of the family had died. I think Sirhan should be killed - a life for a life. During school I just started staring at the American flag. The Battle Hymn of the Republic pops into my head all the time. It's not till a person dies that you realize how good he was. Last night I was reading in the encyclopedia about John Kennedy and Robert Kennedy. They were both great Americans."

How were other children affected by this tragedy? Three months after the assassination I talked to 11-year-old Catherine about it. She said, "I was in the fifth grade. We had elections in our current events class and Bobby Kennedy won. Later, at 1:30 A.M. Bobby Kennedy was shot. He was in a very serious condition. If he would have lived there would have been something wrong with him. It was very sad. Our teacher didn't want to talk about it.

Neither did the class. Then, after his death, they had three days of the funeral. The family was there and all the relatives, and other people. There were so many people there - it was twenty blocks long. It was the worst tragedy since his brother died. That's why elections were postponed to September."

"The class had been watching what was happening on TV. The man who shot him was part Mexican and part Spanish. He was in the hall where Bobby was talking. He entered the kitchen and he saw the guard and Kennedy walk out. He shot four of the guards and he shot Kennedy; two bullets in back of the head - two bullets on the side of his neck - one bullet on his left arm. Some man saw him shoot them and the police immediately rushed in, captured the man, and Kennedy's wife was immediately called. Then the ambulance came and they took Kennedy to the nearest hospital. Four guards took care of the man who shot him - Sirhan Sirhan. The crowd tried to rip Sirhan apart - tore off his coat. They forced him into the police car and drove away."

I said, "Do you think teachers should talk about it?"

She answered, "They could talk about it but should not rub it in. It's sad. Don't rub it in. Don't talk about it. About two weeks ago Sirhan's brother was in court and a girl shot him. He was wounded."

Catherine's seven-year-old sister said, "Bobby Kennedy - he was the president. Someone shot him - a man with black curly hair."

These conversations reveal the distorted way children interpret what they see on TV and how they absorb the concern and disquietude

of the adults around them. It shows the influence of the teacher who didn't want to talk about the death. Neither did the class want to discuss it, although talking about it would have helped the children learn to face the fact of death, in a situation that was tragic, yet not as close to them as a member of their family would be. The younger child was much more confused than her sister. She had vague, distorted ideas about what happened. But she did absorb a vivid picture of killing and violence by watching TV.

Robert Hertz (9), an anthropologist, says that Shertham has labeled the murder of famous people "magnicide." Hertz says, "In tribal societies unexpected death of a young and important citizen seems to shake the community's faith in its own power of survival. Intensified mourning rituals result."

I suppose that the leader represents the protective father figure and the tribe suddenly feels unprotected and vulnerable. This is also the way a child feels who suddenly loses a father and has no one to turn to for guidance, support, and protection. He feels alone and helpless, as if the bottom has been pulled out from under him. Jackson (10) says, "Children think their parents are all-powerful and are confused when their parents cannot meet a crisis with complete mastery." At such a time it is no wonder that a child feels deserted and unprotected in a frightening world. Our children today feel closer to leaders and identify with them, because they know how they look from seeing them on television.

WHAT PARENTS CAN DO

How can we best help children deal with the problem of death? We must help parents understand children's concepts of death, in accordance with their age and development. Their experience with the idea of death should start early with casual remarks about dead flowers, insects, birds. They should go through the ceremony of burying dead birds and pets.

The child should be told that death is final and that the dead body cannot feel anything. He should participate in the funeral and mourning rites of parents, siblings, and relatives. Sorrow must be shared but the child should not be forced to view the body, and if he is afraid, he should not be forced to attend the funeral. But usually children over six years of age do want to attend the funeral and should be encouraged to do so. It helps the child know definitely what has become of the body and where it is buried, so that he does not have false fantasies of where the body really is. At the funeral he senses the sadness but he also absorbs the spiritual admosphere.

The child should be encouraged to ask questions and to talk freely, in a normal and natural way about death, and about the dead person's life. He must be told the difference between sleep and death. If he has fears that he or his parents might die, he must be reassured that he and his parents are in good health and expect to live a long life. Children should absorb from their parents the basic truth that death is part of life and must be accepted as a reality with which all human beings must deal.

Rose Zeligs, Ed.D.
14256 Ventura Blvd.
Sherman Oaks, Cal. 91403

SUMMARY

Children's concepts of death grow with their age and development. The three-year-old begins to notice that living things move and make sounds. The five-year-old thinks that life and death are reversable, but the six-year-old knows that death is final and brings sorrow. Children from eight through ten are interested in the causes of death and what happens after death. Adolescents think of death and what happens after death as fearsome yet fascinating, since they are very much aware of the life producing potentialities in their own bodies.

Children's reactions to an experience with death are greatly influenced by parental attitudes. The deaths of public figures by assassination and the vivid TV descriptions of the funeral upset most children but proved especially traumatic to emotionally disturbed children. Parents can best help children deal with death by not making it a taboo subject; by explaining to the child that death is final, by not sending him away during the mourning periods, and encouraging him to participate in the funeral rites of parents, siblings, and other relatives, and by talking freely about the dead person. Children should absorb from their parents the basic truth that death is part of life and must be accepted as a reality.

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